

Eyeless in Indochina

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

In the spring issue of *Public Policy*, the journal of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, Daniel Ellsberg advanced an arresting and subtle interpretation of the American adventure in Indochina. He was concerned to disprove what he called "the quagmire myth"—the proposition, that is, that our leaders did not know what they were getting into in Southeast Asia; that they marched blindly, step by step, into a morass; that our descent into the Vietnam catastrophe was marked (as Mr. Ellsberg accurately states the essence of the quagmire thesis) by "lack of foresight, awareness, or calculation."¹

Mr. Ellsberg directed his critique against a view he found most conveniently formulated in writings of mine (doing so, I may add, with entire courtesy and in excellent temper). As against what I had once called the "politics of inadvertence,"² Mr. Ellsberg offered what I read as a sort of politics of clairvoyance. A succession of American Presidents, he said, fully understanding that there was a "high probability that US troops would end up fighting in South Vietnam, and US planes bombing throughout Indochina," not only "failed to resist" this future but "knowingly cooperated with and prepared" it.

Against the quagmire image of leaders blundering into what, to their surprise, turned out to be quicksand, Mr. Ellsberg offered the counter-image of "repeatedly, a leader striding with his eyes open into what he sees as quicksand." He summed up his argument in a quotation approvingly cited from Leslie Gelb, his associate in the Pentagon study of American policy in Indochina: "Our Presidents and most of those who influenced their decisions did not stumble step-by-step into Vietnam, unaware of the quagmire. US involvement did not stem from a failure to foresee consequences."

In short, the quagmire thesis, however plausible on its face, was "totally wrong for each one of those [Indochina] decisions over the last twenty years.... Not one of these decision points... fits Schlesinger's generalization to the effect that the... awful cost of our Vietnam course, Mr. Ellsberg concluded, made it "easy to

students would want, before and after, to conceal and deprecate their own foreknowledge."³

This seemed a drastic contention. It was that American Presidents, knowing they were heading into a hopeless mess, fully foreseeing the consequences, nonetheless insisted on plunging on. The failure of American policy was not at all the absence of foreknowledge—in Mr. Gelb's phrase, "the system worked"—but unwillingness to act on the basis of foreknowledge. Moreover, this facet of Mr. Ellsberg's argument has, since the publication of the Pentagon Papers, been readily adopted by influential journalists. Thus we find Max Frankel writing in *The New York Times*:

This was not a war into which the United States stumbled blindly, step by step, on the basis of wrong intelligence or military advice that just a few more soldiers or a few more air raids would turn the tide.⁴

Murray Marder in the *Washington Post*:

The American march into the war in Indochina was neither the result of carelessness nor of absent-mindedness, but of purposefulness, the documents confirm.⁵

Charles Bailey in the *Minneapolis Tribune*:

The United States did not—as some opponents of the war have charged—"blunder" into its Vietnam involvement. On the contrary, the documents show that the highest officials were constantly aware that steps they were taking could lead to much greater involvement.⁶

The fact that thoughtful newspapermen, who have followed the Vietnam involvement for a long time, should have thus accepted the foresight thesis was impressive. But before this thesis was permitted to sweep the field, it seemed a good idea to subject it to closer examination.

So I took on the sour task of reading the Pentagon Papers—at least all of them the American press has seen fit to print.⁷ This ordeal did not

radically alter my view that our Indochina policy had been characterized more by ignorance, misjudgment, and muddle than by foresight, awareness, and calculation. Accordingly I wrote a rejoinder to Mr. Ellsberg's *Public Policy* essay. *The New York Review* agreed to publish this paper, and the editors of the *Review* also decided, quite properly, to invite Mr. Ellsberg to respond. Since both Mr. Ellsberg and I were more concerned with clarifying questions than with scoring points, I welcomed his suggestion that we talk in advance in order to narrow grounds of difference and eliminate false issues. Our conversations were most useful in this regard, and I commend the technique to editors. However, after several hours of amiable colloquy, it was evident that enough disagreement remained to justify the continuation of the discussion.

In the course of our talks, both of us made concessions to the opposing view. Each of us supposed his own concession to be rather minor, and both tended, I think, to regard the concession of the other as rather major. It may perhaps be best to begin with my sense of what these concessions involved.

For my part, I had readily agreed in my draft rejoinder that I was wrong in having written that "at each point along the ghastly way, the generals promised that just one more step of military escalation would bring the victory so long sought and so steadily denied" and that "each step in the deepening of the American commitment was reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary."⁸ Immersion in the Pentagon Papers had persuaded me that I was mistaken in the suggestion that the escalatory steps actually taken by Presidents were accompanied by promises that these particular steps would bring victory or would be the last steps necessary. No President ever escalated enough to satisfy the military, who always complained about civilian restrictions on military action and kept insisting that they be allowed to bomb, shoot, and drown more and more Vietnamese.

Mr. Ellsberg felt that if I admitted this, then the whole quagmire thesis was wrong. At the